



Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Montague, Stephen. 1983. 'Orchestration for the 20th-Century Musician'. *Contact*, 27. pp. 38-40. ISSN 0308-5066.

Stephen Montague

Orchestration for the 20th-century Musician

Alfred Blatter, *Instrumentation/Orchestration* (London: Longman, 1980), £12.50

I was recently in New York's largest music store browsing through the specialist books by Thomas Howell, Robert Dick, Phillip Rehfeldt, Bertram Turetzky, Stuart Dempster, and others on the extended techniques and performing practices currently in use by many composers and performers world-wide. I then moved on into the section of

orchestration books and was somewhat surprised to see only the old familiar tomes by Forsyth, Piston, Kennan, Berlioz, and the rest on the shelf. I asked the shop assistant if there were any new orchestration books as interesting as some of the instrumental books I had just seen. He looked at me and replied smartly: 'Whatcha see is what's in print, pal.' A few minutes later under the heading 'Scoring and Arranging' I came across Alfred Blatter's new book, *Instrumentation/Orchestration*, and gleefully took it over to the shop assistant. 'Well, ya didn't ask for a new book on "instrumentation", did ya?' What could I say?

I understand that *Instrumentation/Orchestration* has now been available for a couple of years both in Britain and the United States, but I have yet to see it on the shelves of music shops in this country. Perhaps I was always looking under the wrong heading, for I got the same reaction in London as I had in New York: when I asked a shop assistant at Foyles for the 'orchestration' book by Blatter, he said: 'Isn't that an "instrumentation" book, sir?' Evidently shop assistants and booksellers make a kind of differentiation between those terms that we composers blur. At any rate, what I finally got hold of has certainly turned out to be the best all-round orchestration book (or instrumentation book, if you like) published in years.

The author, Alfred Blatter, is a graduate of the University of Illinois, a composer, horn player, and arranger, the senior editor of Media Press (a publishing house specialising in avant-garde music), one of the American panelists at the International Conference on New Music Notation in Ghent, and head of the music department and Director of Performing Arts at Drexel University, Philadelphia. His *Instrumentation/Orchestration*, like the Piston, Kennan, and other orchestration books printed in the last couple of decades, is designed to be used by both student and professional musicians. But where most of the earlier books have really very little to offer the working professional, Blatter's appendix gives a comprehensive account of instrumental resources, which alone is nearly worth the price of the book. Extensive charts show, for instance, all the fingerings and alternative fingerings for woodwind, brass, and even strings; the overtone series for every chromatic note is given up to and including the 16th partial; the intervals and directions of transposition of just about all Western instruments are supplied, including out-of-the-way candidates like the Heckelphone, baritone oboe, Wagner tubas, and oboe d'amore; and the possibilities for electronic sound modification are dealt with in some detail.

What makes this book outstanding, compared with its competitors, is its breadth. Here at last is an orchestration book that attempts to handle the vast resources available to the composer and arranger in the late 20th century; the author is clearly aware of the rapid development of instrumental techniques over the past two decades, and these developments are given good coverage (alongside the three Bs, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg). Blatter assumes rightly that many of the so-called 'avant-garde' techniques of yesterday are today almost common practice. The Bartók pizzicato, for example, is now a standard technique, and few players are shocked any more by being asked to play behind the bridge of a string instrument, or produce a multiphonic on a woodwind. The list of 'impossibilities' gets shorter, Blatter remarks, while the list of possibilities grows longer. In Strauss's edition of Berlioz' treatise on instrumentation (1904-5) it is said to be 'very rare' and 'very difficult' for a C trumpet to play a high B flat, B natural, or C; Kennan (1964) suggested the A flat below high C

as the practical limit, and B flat as the practical professional limit. But today any composer who has worked with professional, or even good student trumpet players knows that they have no difficulty in playing top C or D; so it is quite reasonable for Blatter to notate the range of the C trumpet as extending to top E or even higher for professionals. In addition he lists the pedal notes for brass instruments, which are rarely mentioned in other books, but are frequently found in new solo and chamber works. The chapter on percussion instruments, an area where resources have expanded enormously, is also very useful. For the professional, then, this is an invaluable reference work.

Reference is not, however, the chief purpose of the book. *Instrumentation/Orchestration* is designed to accompany a one- or two-term course in orchestration for beginners or intermediate students. For a textbook the approach is very good. The discussion of each subject proceeds from the general to the specific. The chapters dealing with the families of orchestral instruments, for example, begin with information that applies equally to all members of a family—articulation, special effects, notation, etc.—then go on, in sub-chapters, to deal in detail with the individual instruments. Traditional 18th- and 19th-century playing techniques are described, followed by discussion of newer developments, such as extended techniques, notation of special effects, the different types of mute available, and so on. Each sub-chapter concludes with exercises in writing for the instrument alone and in combination with others, and a good, up-to-date bibliography. The musical examples strike a sensible balance between classical, 20th-century, and avant-garde works (Media Press publications abound, of course). There are good photographs by David Hruby of all the instruments, and of mutes and mallets. All the instrumental ranges are, for once, clearly notated and illustrated. Three are presented for each instrument: elementary school, high school (16-18 year olds), and professional. The illustrations of the 'dynamic curves' are a nice addition for students: Blatter provides a graph for each instrument, which represents its natural dynamic properties in relation to its register—a horizontal, cone-shaped figure, for example, means that the instrument is softer in the lower range and louder in the upper registers.

The annotated listing of chapter headings that follows will give an idea of the wide scope of Blatter's book:

I. The Basics: Preparing Scores and Parts

The author's extensive experience as senior editor of a music-publishing firm gives this chapter some authority. A good many professional composers and arrangers would do well to read these 23 pages and follow the suggestions.

II. Instrumentation: The Orchestral Strings

In addition to the usual information about string writing, there is a brief, but good discussion of special bowing effects, such as 'scratch tone', bowing the tailpiece, 'silent fingerings', etc. In the section on harmonics (and throughout the book where appropriate), the recommended notation from the 1974 Ghent International Conference on New Music Notation is used.

III. Instrumentation: The Woodwinds

Because many more extended techniques have been developed in the last few years on woodwind instruments, the discussion is much lengthier in this chapter than in that on the strings. Slap-tonguing, multiphonics, air tones, etc. are discussed, but it

seems to be assumed that for finer details of such techniques the reader will consult the specialist books by Howell,¹ Dick,² and Rehfeldt,³ and the newer books that are constantly appearing. Unfortunately, though, specific references are not made to sources such as these in footnotes, nor are they highlighted in the bibliography. There is nothing to indicate the vast research on multiphonics, for example, in Howell's flute book: some 1826 examples with fingerings and commentary!

IV. Instrumentation: The Brass

As with the woodwind, a great deal of talent and energy has gone into developing the ranges and playing techniques of all brass instruments in recent years. There is a thorough treatment of these developments and techniques, but again footnotes to lead the reader to sources for further study, or to music utilising new playing methods would have been a worthwhile addition. There is a photograph of the 16 or so mutes now available to brass players, and a useful discussion of their characteristics.

V. Instrumentation: The Percussion

This is one of the best chapters in the book. Unlike Smith Brindle, whose percussion book frustratingly leaves out the ranges of many of the percussion instruments,⁴ Blatter gives the ranges and transpositions of just about all the pitched instruments, from Almglocken, slide whistles, and flexatones, to rototoms, steel drums, and tubaphones. There are clear photographs of most of the instruments, and more than four pages are devoted to the graphic symbols used to represent them in scores and to their names in French, Italian, German, and English. Most orchestration books gloss over the variety of mallets and sticks available and their different purposes, but here there is an excellent discussion, and again illustrations, symbols, and names in four languages.

VI. Instrumentation: The Other Instruments

This is another splendid chapter, which deals with various miscellaneous instruments and their playing techniques: piano, electric piano, toy piano, harpsichord, double-action harp, Troubadour harp, pipe organ, electric organs, guitars, electric guitars, mandolin, ukulele, banjos, electric bass, pedal steel guitar, accordion, harmonica, harmonium, recorders, and ocarinas. There is a brief discussion of tablatures, and again the ranges of all the instruments, including ocarinas, are clearly illustrated.

VIII. Orchestration: Scoring Musical Elements

It is at this point that Blatter first makes a distinction between 'instrumentation' and 'orchestration', though unfortunately he does not come right out with a clear definition of each term. Perhaps the reader is intended to infer their meanings from the subject matter of the chapter, which covers identification of musical lines, the use of instrumental colour, scoring prominent and subordinate lines and isolated chords, and special approaches such as *Klangfarbenmelodie*. The last is illustrated by an excerpt from Elliott Carter's woodwind quartet *Eight Etudes and a Fantasy*, while more traditional extracts—from Wagner, Berlioz, Ravel, and others—neatly exemplify Blatter's system of scoring procedures.

IX. Orchestration: Scoring for Various Ensembles

Blatter's 'ensembles' include not only traditional groups such as the string orchestra, but also marching bands, percussion groups, and even a drum kit. There is an interesting list of instrumental substitutions showing what instruments can be made to sound like one another if an ensemble is incomplete.

X. Orchestration: The Technique of Transcribing

Transcribing is defined as a more elementary process than arranging. The usual solutions to the problems it involves are suggested, but some original hints pop up at various points. In transcribing organ literature, for example, one should remember that 'The pedal line is not always the bass . . . Even when it is the bass, it may not be in the octave notated.' (p.357)

XI. Orchestration: The Technique of Arranging

It is a little disappointing that this chapter is not longer and more thorough. Taking *America the Beautiful*, Blatter shows certain possibilities for arranging it, but unfortunately he does not carry the process to its logical conclusion and provide some complete versions: two or three methods of treating the first 16 bars, for instance, could have been instructive. What he has done is excellent, but as one of the culminating chapters this hardly balances all the detailed material presented before. It also seems to me that somewhere mention should have been made of the Boosey & Hawkes miniature score of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which has the original piano version below Ravel's famous orchestral version, and of some other well-known 'arrangements' of a similar type. Moreover, considering that drum kits, electric guitars, and other pop instruments are mentioned earlier in the book, I felt that Blatter should have discussed the writing and scoring of pop music; at very least he could have referred to some literature on the subject. The bibliography for chapters VIII to XII is a little too selective: where are the books on writing film scores, for example?

XII. Orchestration: Some Final Thoughts

This chapter is aimed primarily at the student. It lists the typical constitution of various ensembles from the symphony orchestra to jazz bands. Blatter has some good ideas about organising resources and judging your own work. And some nice homilies: 'The serious orchestrator is never really satisfied . . . one can always seek new and different tonal possibilities.' (p.376)

The book is nicely laid out, easy to handle, and has a tough, shiny, ink-proof cover. But I have a couple of minor criticisms to make about the production. The labels for musical examples are placed under rather than over the excerpts, which I found strangely irritating. The ink in my copy was slightly smeared on several pages, and in some of the illustrations in the appendix the stave-lines were broken. However, these are insignificant points which scarcely mar an excellent work. Alfred Blatter has given us a text- and reference book that reflects the state of the art in the last quarter of the 20th century, and a tool that students and professionals alike will use for the rest of their creative lives.

¹ Thomas Howell, *The Avant-garde Flute: a Handbook for Composers and Flutists* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

² Robert Dick, *The Other Flute: a Performance Manual of Contemporary Techniques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³ Phillip Rehfeldt, *New Directions for the Clarinet, The New Instrumentation*, vol.3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

⁴ Reginald Smith Brindle, *Contemporary Percussion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).